

# TYRANNA

Tyranna were a visually striking, lyrically provocative, second-wave punk band from Toronto. They did several studio recording sessions, but only "Back Off Baby," which appeared on the No Pedestrians comp, was released in 1980. Despite this, Tyranna had gained a loyal following and supported internationally renowned acts. Last fall a record label named Boppa Do Down released a five song EP and Tyranna did a reunion show to support the release. We had a chance to talk with them shortly after. Interview by Stephen Perry, edits by Johnny Bubleghum and photos by Don Pyle.



**MRR:** Introduce yourselves and tell us what you do in the band?

Cleave Anderson: I'm Cleave Anderson, drummer.

Johnny Bubleghum: I'm Johnny Bubleghum, bass player and last founding member involved.

Ronnie Partridge: Ronnie Partridge, guitar.

**MRR:** How did you guys get into punk?

Cleave Anderson: I had a subscription to *Rolling Stone* magazine. I remember reading about a bunch of bands playing at CBGBs, probably in '75. I always wanted to be part of something new so I took a trip down to Max's Kansas City, which was another hotbed. When I came back to Toronto I saw a poster for the Dishes that said "... about to be a household name." I saw them at the Beverley Tavern and kept watching for posters. Being a bit older, I'd already had a taste of the '60s garage rock thing and always felt like I never finished with that raw rock 'n' roll energy. Punk was almost a way of re-connecting and moving into the future with something that I thought had been neglected.

Johnny Bubleghum: I was a little later. CFNY, as it was known then, Edge 102FM, actually was good and played some early Sex Pistols. My brother worked in Hamilton and I sent him to Star Records to pick up a French pressing of "Anarchy in the UK". The Ramones down picking style had already affected my bass playing, but it was when I heard the Sex Pistols that I had to start a band. That was early '77. Luckily in the summer of '78 I got a call from John Zeigler to come to Toronto and join Tyranna.

Ronnie Partridge: I was the youngest guy in the band. Like Johnny, I listened to CFNY and heard the Sex Pistols. It just blew my mind because I didn't like anything else I was hearing. I couldn't understand it, so I was listening to stuff like old Led Zeppelin. The next thing I know I'm auditioning for the Viletones and going to Dead Boys shows. Vera put an ad in the paper, I replied and I got involved with Tyranna.

**MRR:** It seems a big step to go from listening to music to playing in a band.

Johnny Bubleghum: That was true for me. I got a bass in Grade nine and played to some records, but I hadn't played it seriously in several months when I got the call from Zeigler. When I got the call I put on Teenage Head's "Tearin' Me Apart" and got my fingers going again. Two rehearsals later Tyranna had a gig.

**MRR:** That's a bit of a whirlwind.

Johnny Bubleghum: Yeah, it was a real whirlwind. But I was out in Burlington in my teens. That put me closer to Hamilton so I got to see Teenage Head as my first live punk experience.

**MRR:** That is my next question. What were some of the shows that you saw when first getting into the scene?

Cleave Anderson: I'll go back to garage rock, seeing the Ugly Ducklings in Grade ten. I went to that first Ramones show the Gary's did at the New Yorker Theatre, September '76. That show was an introduction for me. Crash 'n Burn started after that, I was at a couple of those shows—the Dead Boys, Teenage Head and the Diodes.

Ronnie Partridge: I was younger and still in high school. I missed so much. It was the Horseshoe and then the Turning Point for me.

Cleave Anderson: The Beverley Tavern was going even before the Crash 'n Burn. That's where I saw the Dishes and Battered Wives, the original version of the band which I ended up joining.

**MRR:** How did the band actually form? How did Tyranna come together?

Johnny Bubblegum: I never really got the story about how Zeigler, the original guitarist, and Vera met up, but I imagine just at one of the clubs. They started doing some rehearsals and song writing in early '78 I believe.

**MRR:** And Vera was the singer?

Cleave Anderson: Yeah. "Rabies." She had a band called Queenie. Tony Brighton from the Uby was in it. Vera and Zeigler got together and started writing. "Unfaithful / Divorce" and "Shockface" continued into the band.

**MRR:** How did they know you?

Johnny Bubblegum: Zeigler was a friend-of-a-friend in Burlington. We rehearsed once in some kid's basement. The whole afternoon was spent trying to do "Paranoid" and on the strength of that he called me up for Tyranna. I did two rehearsals with John and Vera, all of us singing and playing through one 12" amp. The third time, John met me at the subway and told me we had a new guitarist, a drummer and gigs Thursday, Friday and Saturday. This was a Sunday.

**MRR:** So Tyranna was actually a five piece at one point?

Johnny Bubblegum: For the first three gigs. Dave Porter, drumming. John Tucker on guitar. He had the clean Telecaster sound. Zeigler had his Les Paul gold top, which he dug out himself with a drill and a chisel to put in a third pick up, which gave it a very distinct, totally fuzzed out sound. It was as much the work he did on his guitar as the MXR pedal he used.

**MRR:** You mentioned that within two weeks you did a recording at a place called Wade Avenue Artist Collective. John Tucker had a four track studio?

Johnny Bubblegum: John had his, and it wasn't a Fostex. It was a high end four track which was rare. That was a whole artist collective. Robbie Rox lived there, photographers, painters. That's where the first and second demos were done. The 1979 demo was at Basement Studio in Hamilton that Mickey de Sadist introduced us to.

**MRR:** And Mickey played a part in this right?

Cleave Anderson: He was hanging out in the studio with us. He lived nearby. He joined in on the background vocals on "My Neighbour."

**MRR:** And there's a live recording from the Edge?

Johnny Bubblegum: Well I discovered a live tape last week from early 1979. We're smoking. We may try and get that to see the light of day. I don't think they had any idea what was going to hit them that night. I was just on fire about the whole thing. So we took Sunday off. I'd been wearing the same clothes all week and needed to go home and change. Monday we started recording the first demo. I guess Zeigler had it up his back about the other guitarist—even though the two guitar sound was very distinct. He recorded the

**MRR:** And how long was Tyranna around?

Johnny Bubblegum: Tyranna played three or four nights with Jayne County at the Edge for New Year's Eve 1980. They were recording the live album. Those were the final gigs. So it was a year and a half from beginning to end.

**MRR:** Cleave, you mentioned something about Vera approaching you at a Horseshoe gig?

Cleave Anderson: That was the Last Pogo. December 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> '78. I'd been in the Battered Wives and wasn't going to be doing that anymore. I'd seen Tyranna at the Turning Point and it was Johnny Bubblegum's bass playing that I thought "I like that. He's got the style down." Blues has certain characteristics and country and reggae, and punk rock was a new style emerging. I was looking for a band with those ingredients so I could be part of that. Tyranna was definitely identified as punk rock.

Johnny Bubblegum: Just to expand on that—we did play punk rock. We weren't just a bunch of old rockers toughening it up with different clothes and calling it punk rock. Vera had a very strong melody and vocal attack. And she was really confrontational with her ideas. Incredibly striking woman. Then you have the two guitars. Zeigler with his completely fuzzed-out, heavy metal, sound. Like old Black Sabbath. John Tucker was very angular. I had never heard of anybody playing alternate tunings before. The drummer was kind of loose and jazzy. There was this blend of elements that you wouldn't think to put together, really. I think that was very punk. I feel that Tyranna as a band was inventing something new. Maybe not globally, but in Toronto, we had a unique sound. That first gig, Mohammed from the Dents called us "Sophisto-punk," which I took as a great compliment.

**MRR:** When did Ronnie come into the band?

Ronnie Partridge: Vera put an ad in the newspaper. We met and the same night we wrote a few songs. Cleave came over the following day and I kind of auditioned for him.

Johnny Bubblegum: Cleave coming in...he had way more experience. His drumming solidified our sound. His energy gelled the band into a tighter, stronger outfit.

Ronnie Partridge: If we were wasting too much time in between songs he would get us going. Everything stayed together and we didn't waste much time.

Johnny Bubblegum: If there was a part that was loose Cleave would have us go over it a few times.

Cleave Anderson: Yeah, I had the whip out.

**MRR:** Was that rehearsal place out in the west end?

Ronnie Partridge: I was out in Scarborough. The very east end of Scarborough. I got into a lot of fights in the subway. I got beat up a lot, but I never lost my Les Paul. Nobody got that handle out of my hands no matter how hard they tried. That's the thing. To go a little off topic, it was very violent to walk around because Vera and I, after I left Scarborough and stayed in the west end, we lived



Johnny Bubleghum: Yeah, and I didn't do it enough. I realize now I could have added a lot more to the band in that time. I could've been writing songs with Vera but I left it to her to get the band back together. I was just a lazy kid. I was still living in Burlington when we got the call from the Gary's to open for the Dils at the very last minute. When I realized how fast things could happen, that was my call to get into the city.

Cleave Anderson: It worked well that Ron and Rabies wrote songs together. There was a smattering of Johnny's songs and mine, too. It all blended in.

Johnny Bubleghum: "Test Tube Babies" was written for the second demo and Curse gigs. Vera wrote most of the song but said "I need something a little more poppy and high energy for this section," so she brought that to me. There was more interaction between Vera and I in the first band, before Ronnie came in. Then they were a really strong songwriting team.

Ronnie Partridge: I was living in the rehearsal house with Vera and her dad. I would just be banging away making noise and she would say "Play that one again," or "Keep that one." She'd get her little cassette and tape it. She did all the lyrics. She might ask me for a rhyme to a line, but all the lyrics were from Vera.

**MRR: Where did the name Tyranna come from? At first I thought it was a bastardization of the name Toronto.**

Johnny Bubleghum: Vera told me that she asked her mother or father what would be a good name for the band. And it's only since Google has been around and you put Tyranna in and see what you can find that I've realized that there's this mythical figure out of Russian tradition called Tyranna. Vera's parents were Russian, so that might be behind it as well.

Cleave Anderson: Vera wanted to be a dominant front person. She was a tall woman. She wanted to come across like leading a gang of guys. She wanted to sound tyrannical and feminine at the same time, hence Tyranna.

**MRR: There were some shows with the Forgotten Rebels at the Turning Point and you were also playing at Larry's Hideaway with Johnny and the G Rays the same night. How did this end?**

Cleave Anderson: We played with the G-Rays and then went over to the Turning Point. Forgotten Rebels opened for us, I am assuming.

Johnny Bubleghum: Yeah, we traded nights headlining.

Cleave Anderson: Sometimes. We were as big as Forgotten Rebels weren't we?

Johnny Bubleghum: In Toronto. That gig was when they put out their first EP. They got well known soon because the CRTC immediately banned three of the four songs.

**MRR: There is a story that goes along with this about a gang.**

Johnny Bubleghum: "Third Homosexual Murder" was on the EP. An alleged gang called the Spearheads called the club up and said if the band plays that song on Saturday night we're taking Mickey out. So Rabies called down the Blake Street Boys just to make sure things were okay. The Blake Street Boys, who were the Viletones entourage, showed up looking for a fight and of course the Spearheads never showed, and all hell ensued.

**MRR: You were telling me something about chairs going into a pinball machine.**

Johnny Bubleghum: Into the pinball machines, into the walls, all the tables... Chairs went into the PA. None of the tables ever stood properly after that night. Once that riot



started that was it. Somebody was almost killed in front of me. A full beer bottle went into the guy's head and he went down onto the floor. Three or four guys went at him with boots and chairs and then the cops came in. The guy was lying there immobile for a long time. I never did hear what happened to him.

**MRR: There was a place called Queen's City Second Stop. Where was that?**

Cleave Anderson: Finch and Keele. It was just a bar in a little industrial plaza. I had played there with Jasper a full year before Tyranna and I don't know how. He must have known somebody. It was really a weird place for us to be playing. When Tyranna formed there weren't really very many places to play. We just had to hustle gigs. That is how we ended up in Tottenham.

Johnny Bubleghum: That same booker got us the Tottenham gig, got us the Piccadilly Tube - one of our very last gigs.

**MRR: November 24<sup>th</sup>.**

Johnny Bubleghum: This was significant because it was kind of unheard of for any of the punk bands to play the Piccadilly Tube. That was the Yonge Street strip. The home of Max Webster and Rush and the rock scene.

**MRR: That was the enemy. That's very weird.**

Johnny Bubleghum: It was just a completely different crowd and scene though I think we actually did okay at the Piccadilly Tube.

**MRR: Someone was in a cast at this show?**

Johnny Bubleghum: That was me.

**MRR: What appendage was broken?**

Johnny Bubleghum: The right leg. The knee still bothers me. I popped it at a rehearsal and was in a cast. That was the only gig at which I ever stood still.

**MRR: Yeah you said that was uncomfortable because you couldn't move around.**

Johnny Bubleghum: Yeah. I felt like a total lame ass. I thought you put on a show. That was your job.

**MRR: You mentioned something about Tottenham. What was that show like? The place is like a redneck bastion. How did you survive that show?**

Johnny Bubleghum: Cleave and I got out of Dodge right away and Ronnie and Vera hung around.

Ronnie Partridge: Well they offered us a room for the night.

It was pretty low end. These guys invited us to a party and so we went. Once we got to the party I could tell it was a mistake. These guys were really rough. I just wanted to get Vera and I out of there. They realized we were getting ready to take off. We got out to my old MG and it started but it was revving really fast. I backed out and later found that they had taken off a couple of spark plugs, but it got us out of there. We were so happy to see that room after all. It looked wonderful.

Cleave Anderson: And the gig itself was probably a mistake. I don't think there were a lot of people there. They didn't get it at all. It was uncomfortable.



Johnny Bubblegum: It was definitely hostile. Guys sitting there with their motorcycle helmets on their chair and directly baiting the band.

MRR: Tell us about the Iggy Pop gig. November 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. How did that come about? Was it a Gary's show?

Cleave Anderson: Yeah. Iggy had a crackerjack band. Glenn Matlock from the Pistols on bass, Brian James from the Damned on guitar, who else?

Ronnie Partridge: Tangerine Dream on drums.

Johnny Bubblegum: It was either Tangerine Dream or Patti Smith's drummer.

Cleave Anderson: It was our finest moment. We played our best ever. It was a full house. Totally memorable night for us. Wilder Penfield III chose it as one of the top shows of the year.

Johnny Bubblegum: Yeah, he mentioned that the high rating was because of the opening acts. We totally rehearsed for that gig. When we were on stage it was like hearing a

We got a case of beer and a dressing room. I remember we were up in the office at The Edge when the Garys asked us if we wanted to play it and my jaw hit the floor. I had been in a band for a year and a half and there I was talking to Glenn Matlock. We were both holding our basses side-stage and I was talking to the guy who had written "Anarchy in the UK," the song that started it all for me. I was losing it. Ron was sitting with Brian James down in the audience while we were doing sound check.

Ronnie Partridge: I got in trouble for "Revenge" the first night. I'd grab a beer and down it and then do a slide riff. Of course, I drank the beer and most of it went all over me. I did my slide thing and was told by the Edge staff "Mr. Pop likes a dry floor. You just made it all wet. He won't be able to slide in that area. Don't do that tomorrow night."

Johnny Bubblegum: Iggy said "hi" though.

Ronnie Partridge: He was very pleasant.

MRR: Okay tell us about ... there was a gig that you did at the Edge with Jane County.

Cleave Anderson: Well the Garys had booked Jane County in for New Year's to record a live album.

MRR: Did you guys get an opportunity to record as well?

Ronnie Partridge: After we played the first night the record company offered to record us. But the night before we went to the Piccadilly Tube and I got beat up pretty bad. I could still play. My fingers were all fine, so we showed up, but it turned out that we were going on after Jane County. As she left, she took all the good recording microphones so the Edge used their own. Unfortunately they were just standard SM58's and they bled all over the place, so the recording was very poor and wasn't used.

MRR: The one song that did get released around that period was "Back Off Baby" on the *No Pedestrian* comp. How did the compilation come about?

Cleave Anderson: Well there was this guy named Tom Atom who had Cottingham Sound. There weren't many recording studios around at the time and he was street level and inexpensive. So he decided to choose one song from a bunch of different bands and put out a compilation. Tyranna gave him some demos. He chose "Back Off Baby."

Johnny Bubblegum: Cleave's song. As soon as I found out, that was it. I quit the band.

MRR: So that led to the break up?

Cleave Anderson: Yeah. I left soon after that. I was not very happy about Johnny not being on that. Screamin' Sam Ferrera, of the Ugly and Viletones was on that. I'd played a lot with Sam, he's a good buddy of mine now, but it wasn't the right thing to have him play on that song.

Ronnie Partridge: It wasn't his style either.

Johnny Bubblegum: No hard feelings against Sam.

Cleave Anderson: No. He's a sweetheart.

Johnny Bubblegum: It didn't represent the band well. We



Tyranna demos. So thirty years go by and I'm hanging out at Mitz's Sister, Fred Robinson from UIC introduces me to this guy Tim who is starting a label. Don Pyle said "Why don't you do Tyranna?" It took maybe a year, but it came out in 2008, the 30<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Tyranna. Tim released a track from the very first, one-week-old band and tracks from the Hamilton demo. *Maximum Rocknroll* gave us a very strong review. Several editors singled it out as the top record that month. Then Dave Disaster over in England wrote me to get a signed copy and said you should get more of the stuff out there. He himself sent some songs to Rave Up in Italy and Pierre at Rave Up immediately said he wanted to do Tyranna. We'll have a full LP this December, with Don Pyle cover design and photographs. It'll be the complete studio recordings.

**MRR:** Amazing news. You did a song called "Johnny." Is there a story behind this song?

Johnny Bubblegum: Yes and no. The band was only several days old when we wrote "Johnny." We had two legitimate Johns, and I called myself Johnny, so we called Dave "Johnny" as well. Vera was into confronting the audience, being a provocateur. She was going tongue-in-cheek at the whole "Johnny" culture. The famously bored Toronto audiences don't respond. Vera was trying to get some action happening between the band and the crowd. It worked. The tune was mostly mine and Vera did the lyrics. "Shockface" was another confrontational song. Vera was looking at burns on the street and people going downhill and saying she wanted no part of that.

**MRR:** I think it ends something like "kill the human race."

Johnny Bubblegum: "Shock the race." Vera was an outstanding woman interested in the paranormal and alternative medicine. I had never heard of alternative healing, alternative food ideas... Vera was into all of this way before anybody I ever knew of. That kind of insight went into her lyrics.

I don't know where she came up with her lyrics. But the more she wrote, she started to sing about the environment and space. She started with very street level songs and by the end they were all about the future and space. She just changed direction.

**MRR:** Are those songs like "Test Tube Babies?"

Ronnie Partridge: No, that was an old one. A lot of songs weren't recorded, about cancer and what the environment is doing to us and things that are important nowadays. It weighed heavily on her mind. "Subway" used the subway as a metaphor for going between different states of consciousness. After Cleave and I left the band they did a couple of more gigs as Teranna. There was a UFO on the flyers. Her mind was going in that direction.

Johnny Bubblegum: But another important element with Vera is, if you look at "Johnny" there's that "Na na na na na" and in "Divorce" she uses "Did not, did too." She could use these child world elements. Definitely not pigeon-holed into "this is punk," Vera was a tough, dominant woman who defined her own ideas.

**MRR:** You did a show last year with Zoe from the Bayonettes filling in.

Johnny Bubblegum: Yeah. The EP release.

**MRR:** But Vera was noticeably absent?

Johnny Bubblegum: Vera has some health issues, but she's alive, but she didn't want to take part in the live gig. She hasn't sung in a long time. She gave up on music after the Teranna band with Ron. She's very proud of the record, but she didn't want to go back.

**MRR:** Any other press from back in the day? I saw a Jonathon Gross write up with pictures and stuff.

Johnny Bubblegum: He was a *Toronto Sun* writer interested in the Toronto music scene. He did an article on musician's and their day jobs. He ran a picture of Cleave in his *Postie* outfit. That was the week of Nucci's Bar and Grill. I was crashing at Cleave's house which is why I was there. The *New Music* show on CityTV, began as a print journal that they mailed out. Steven Davies of the *Dishes* wrote a survey of the top bands and the new bands to watch out for. He mentioned Tyranna. That was it for press.

There were maybe two or three street level fanzines, very little press and no airplay. You didn't even have college radio. People say "Tyranna didn't even release anything?" Well, we turned down an English contract because we were worried we'd get ripped off, and it was proved true that we would have gotten ripped off, though we would've had a single in England. With the Iggy Pop show we got reviewed, and managers starting coming around. We were holding out for a good release that hopefully would have taken us somewhere. It wasn't as if we couldn't get it together. Lots of bands somehow managed to put out a single. A lot of those singles don't stand up and don't hold up historically. I think the Tyranna recordings stand up for themselves. The fact that we didn't release something at the time doesn't matter. The recordings are still there.

**MRR:** There is a lot of punk rock archaeology going on where people are finding bands like Tyranna and it's had an impact.

Johnny Bubblegum: Rave Up has about 80 releases. Just like what Lenny Kaye did with the *Nuggets* collection. People are going back and pulling out old recordings of merit. With *Nuggets* they were actual records. If you survey all the recordings and look at who was playing the new punk rock and who was warming over rock 'n roll, I think Tyranna's place in Toronto's history will find it's right level.



There are still copies of the 7" available through Boppa Do Down care of Tim Hanna at 123 Ossington Avenue / Toronto, ON / M6J 2Z2 / Canada. Rave Up Records will release the TYRANNA LP this December. ECW PRESS will publish a book of Don Pyle's photographs, featuring TYRANNA, in April 2011.